

Planning Board scales back Wheaton zoning amendment, drops exemptions

By Karl B. Hille
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The Montgomery County Planning Board balked Thursday at rewriting zoning regulations to double the allowed building height in downtown Wheaton.

The County Council proposed increasing allowable building heights to 125 feet from 60 feet provided developers set aside street-level space for small businesses. They also sought to streamline some approval processes deemed burdensome by small-business owners.

The board voted 3-0 to approve the plan after scaling back many of the exemptions and density bonuses proposed by the council. Commissioners Meredith Wellington and John Robinson abstained.

But commissioners criticized provisions in the amendment that stripped site plan review and other oversight processes, as well as those allowing bonuses for developers who provide "small business" space.

"I don't think we're talking about making room for a 'small' Starbucks," Wellington said.

Wheaton has long been considered the next major redevelopment



Wheaton has long been looked at as the next renewal project for Montgomery County after the revitalization of Downtown Silver Spring. — Greg Whitely/Examiner

project in Montgomery County after the successful reinvention of downtown Silver Spring. But provisions adopted in 1990, in response to public outcry against "Bothwicks-style" redevelopment, imposed limits to preserve Wheaton's small business character.

"Unfortunately, many of the provisions have become disincentives to the types of development the community now desires," said planner

Greg Russ.

Planner Khalid Afzal said the lack of development — only three projects have gone up since the 1990 restrictions became law — has more to do with perception and the difficulty finding or consolidating large enough lots.

Under the existing restrictions, he said five- to six-floor buildings are allowed, but the only sites that would accommodate them are coun-

REDEVELOPING WHEATON

The Planning Board may:

- Allow buildings up to 125 feet tall throughout the central business district.
- Require 45 percent of ground floor retail space be preserved for small stores and restaurants of 3,000 to 5,000 square feet.
- Commissioners said further definition of small businesses is needed.

Source: Planning Board

ty-owned parking lots.

Many residents and business owners supported changes proposed by Council Members Marilyn Praizner and Steve Silverman to relax height and space restrictions in the area north of the Wheaton Metro station.

"I don't think we can wait for the sector plan to be finished in four years in order to discuss some of these issues," said Natalie Cantor of the county's Regional Services Center. "Wheaton has been treading water. Every day you maintain the status quo, you're really just slipping behind."

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